

Message Text

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ACTION AF-08

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FM AMCONSUL ASMARA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4437

AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA

INFO AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO

AMEMBASSY NAIROBI

CINCUSNAVEUR LONDON

COMNAVTELCOM WASHDC

USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN

COMIDEASTFOR

NAVCOMMUNIT ASMARA

NAVCOMMSTA NEA MAKRI

CNO WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 0270

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS, ET

SUBJECT: RECENT MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

1. SUMMARY: FOLLOWING THE APPARENT RESOLUTION OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TROOPS OF THE SECOND DIVISION AND THE DIRG IN MID-MARCH, THE LATTER HALF OF THE MONTH HAS WITNESSED A MIXTURE OF GAINS AND LOSSES FOR BOTH THE EPMG FORCES AND THE INSURGENTS. WHILE THE FALL OF NACFA TO THE PLF WAS A SIGNIFICANT SUCCESS FOR THE INSURGENTS, A PART OF THE EPMG GARRISON APPARENTLY MADE ITS WAY TO THE EPMG OUTPOST AT AFABET, WHICH ALTHOUGH UNDER REBEL PRESSURE IS RECEIVING SUPPORT FROM EPMG FORCES. THE SECOND DIVISION TROOPS ARE DISPLAYING A RENEWED VIGOR IN DEALING WITH THE INSURGENTS AND
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IN PERFORMING THEIR SECURITY FUNCTIONS. THE INSURGENTS CONVERSELY ARE SUFFERING FROM INCREASING FRICTION BETWEEN THE THREE CONTENDING ELEMENTS AND SEEM FURTHER FROM UNIFICATION THAN AT ANY TIME SINCE THE INTENSIFICATION OF THE INSURGENCY IN EARLY 1975.

2. AFTER A SIEGE OF WHICH HAD LASTED OVER SIX MONTHS, THE 200 PLUS-MAN GARRISON OF THE SAHEL PROVINCIAL CAPITAL OF NACFA REPORT-

EDLY SUCCUMBED TO A PLF SURPRISE ATTACK ON MARCH 22. ACCORDING TO AN ERITREAN SOURCE, THE INSURGENTS TUNNELED UNDER THE SHRUNK-EN EPMG PERIMETER AND BURST INTO THE STRONGHOLD BEFORE DAWN. THE SAVAGE FIGHTING LASTED THROUGH THE MORNING, BY WHICH TIME THE BULK OF THE GARRISON WAS KILLED OR CAPTURED. AN ELEMENT OF THE GARRISON APPARENTLY ESCAPED AND EVENTUALLY REACHED THE LAST EPMG STRONGHOLD IN SAHEL AT AFABET (60 KM SSE OF NACFA). ALTHOUGH ERITREAN SOURCES CLAIM THAT THE GARRISON AT AFABET IS NOW ALSO SURROUNDED, THE GARRISON IS RECEIVING REINFORCEMENTS AND AIR SUPPORT. IT IS FURTHER REPORTED THAT A FORCE HAS BEEN DISPATCHED BY ROAD FROM KEREN TO STRENGTHEN AFABET AND TO ENGAGE THE INSURGENTS IN THAT AREA. THIS FORCE IS REPORTED, HOWEVER, TO BE STALLED AT THE SAME POINT (18 KM NNE OF KEREN) ALONG THE AFABET ROAD WHICH THE REBELS HELD SUCCESSFULLY AGAINST THE EPMG'S NACFA RELIEF FORCE IN NOV-DEC 1976.

3. SINCE THE APPARENT RESOLUTION OF GRIEVANCES BETWEEN THE SECOND DIVISION TROOPS AND THE DIRG IN MID MARCH, THE EPMG FORCES IN ERITREA ARE DISPLAYING RENEWED VIGOR IN COUNTERING INSURGENT INITIATIVES AND IN PERFORMING THEIR SECURITY RESPONSIBILITIES. THE MOST APPARENT MANIFESTATION OF THIS HEIGHTENED MOTIVATION WAS THE MASSIVE AND DECISIVE REACTION TO THE INSURGENT HIJACKING OF TWO BUSES ON MARCH 20. WITHIN SEVERAL HOURS OF THE INCIDENT, THE EPMG AUTHORITIES DEPLOYED A NUMBER OF INFANTRY AND ARMORED UNITS ALONG WITH AIR SUPPORT IN PURSUIT OF THE HIJACKERS. THEY RECOVERED ONE BUS WHICH WAS DISABLED AND DESTROYED THE OTHER. THEY KILLED SEVEN INSURGENTS INCLUDING THE LEADER OF THE RAID, HADIS WOLDEGHIORGIS, A FORMER COMMANDO POLICEMAN WHO HAD WON REKNOWN FOR HIS BOLDNESS. IN THE PROCESS, HOWEVER, THEY REPORTEDLY

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KILLED SOME 12 VILLAGERS. EPMG UNITS ARE NOW REPORTED TO BE VYING WITH ONE ANOTHER TO ESCORT THE MASSAWA CONVOY. THE INCENTIVES TRANSCEND SIMPLE REVOLUTIONARY ZEAL; EACH TROOPER ON CONVOY DUTY RECEIVES ET\$9-12 PER DIEM, AND HE HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE IN MINOR BLACK MARKET OPERATIONS. EPMG TROOPS HAVE ESCORTED FUEL CONVOYS TO BOTH THE BELEZA POWER PLANT AND THE MAI NEHFI RESERVOIR WITH REGULARITY. THERE HAS ALSO BEEN A NOTICEABLE INCREASE IN AIR ACTIVITY IN AND OUT OF ASMARA, WHICH INCLUDES AIR SUPPORT OPERATIONS IN THE KEREN-AFABET AREA, FERRYING OF TROOPS AND SUPPLIES TO KEREN AND THE WESTERN LOWLANDS, AND THE ARRIVAL OF MILITARY SUPPLIES FROM ADDIS. AMONG OTHER AIRCRAFT OBSERVED AT ASMARA'S JOINT CIVIL AND MILITARY AIRPORT WAS A SOVIET AN-5 BIPLANE WITH USSR MARKINGS.

4. DESPITE THEIR SUCCESS AT NACFA, AND THEIR MEETINGS IN LATE MARCH, THE INSURGENTS APPEAR TO BE SERIOUSLY RENT BY DIVISION AMONG THE TWO MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS (ELF AND PLF) AND THE FOLLOWERS OF VSMAN SALEH SABBE. FRICTIONS BETWEEN UNITS IN THE FIELD HAVE BEEN INTENSIFYING AS THE ELF AND PLF APPEAR TO BE VYING FOR

CONTROL OF THE LOYALTIES OF ERITREANS IN GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS BEYOND THEIR TRADITIONAL SPHERES. IN THIS COMPETITION FOR GEOGRAPHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DOMINANCE, THERE HAVE BEEN SEVERAL THUS FAR NON-VIOLENT CONFRONTATIONS, AND A MARKED LACK OF COORDINATION BETWEEN THE TWO MAJOR GROUPS. THE FAILURE OF THE ELF TO CAPTURE ELABERET IS BLAMED ON THE LACK OF COORDINATED DIVERSIONARY ATTACKS BY THE PLF, WHO CLAIM THAT THEY WERE NOT INFORMED OF THE ELF'S PLANS. THE PLF SEEMS TO BE TAKING THE INITIATIVE IN THE RIVALRY AS THEY ARE BETTER ARMED AND DISCIPLINED, AND HAVE DEMONSTRATED GREATER MILITARY SKILL IN THE FIELD. THE PLF ARE REPORTEDLY SENDING FORCES IN THE ASSAB PROVINCE TO INTERDICT THE ASSAB-ADDIS ROAD, ALTHOUGH ASSAB PROVINCE HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN ELF TERRITORY. SALEH SABBE SPLINTER FACTION IS SAID TO HAVE SEVERAL THOUSAND WELL-ARMED TROOPS IN SUDAN AND RETAINS THE LOYALTIES OF INSURGENT BANDS ALONG THE COASTAL PLAINS. HIS ACTIONS HAVE THUS FAR SIMPLY MUDDIED THE ALREADY OBSCURE SITUATION. PARTIAL BLAME FOR THE FRICTION IS PLACED ON SALEH SABBE AND THE

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ELF LEADERSHIP WHICH IS ALLEGED TO BE TOO RIGIDLY PRO-ARAB, A POSITION WHICH CHRISTIAN ERITREANS VIEW AS A THREAT TO THEIR POLITICAL AND CULTURAL LIFE. OF PARTICULAR NOTE IS THE THWARTED EXPECTATIONS OF ASMARA RESIDENTS WHO HAD BEEN LED TO BELIEVE THAT MARCH WOULD WITNESS THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF A PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT WITHIN ERITREA. THEY NOW ACCEPT THAT THIS DID NOT OCCUR BECAUSE OF THE CONTINUING DISUNITY, WHEREBY IF ONE FACTION PROCLAIMED A PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT WITHOUT THE CONSENT OF THE OTHER TWO, THESE GROUPS ALSO WOULD THEN EACH PROCLAIM GOVERNMENTS OF THEIR OWN. SOME REASON STILL PREVAILS AS THE INSURGENT FACTIONS HAVE AT LEAST BEEN CONSTRAINED FROM UNLEASHING THIS NEW HAVOC ON THE SEPARATISM MOVEMENT.

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